

Chesapeake Bay Log Canoes

By M. V. Brewington*

Editor's Note: Log canoes have resumed competition following the war. In August, 1948, six log canoes faced the starting line at St. Michael's in competition for the Sidney W. Covington trophy race for boats built prior to 1917. A stiff breeze, however, prevented all but two from finishing. Three—The *Mayflower*, the ancient canoe sailed by Bill Grieb of Chestertown; The *Ginny Babe*, owned by W. R. Schuyler of Baltimore; and *Valiant Lady*, Captain Sam Shanahan, of St. Michael's—met with mishaps before the start of the race. Another, *Island Bird*, after a bad start, finally capsized about halfway on the course. The race was won by *Magic*, Captain Bob Wilson, of Tunis Mills, Maryland, as *Sandy*, Captain Boley Tyler, of Eastport, found it impossible to stick with the bigger boat.

The second race fared little better. It was the Oliver Duke Memorial Trophy race, being contested for the first time in honor of the noted canoe builder and racer who died in June, 1948, at Royal Oak, Maryland. *Oliver's Gift* from Solomon's, sailed by Captain Duke Adams, won the race as *Eagle*, sailed by Dr. Walter Lawson of Washington, only other contestant, failed to finish. The following day, *Oliver's Gift*, sailed by Captain Buck Richardson, took the Governor's Cup, and the John B. Harrison Trophy for boats built since 1917. He later was awarded the Commodore's Cup at Oxford. Captain Buck started racing in canoes around 1898, when he was jib tender on *Island Blossom*.

Island Bird, mentioned above, was purchased in September, 1948, by John C. North of Easton, and thereby returned to the family of William Sidney Covington (North's grandfather), who built it, back in the 1880s. It was purchased from Fred H. Touchton of Baltimore. (*Baltimore Sun*, Aug. 7, 8, 9, 25, 1948, Sept. 18, 1948.)

For generations the vessels built within the shores of Chesapeake Bay have been famous among the sea-faring people of Europe and America. In Maryland and Virginia, the two States which confine the Bay, the master shipwrights have long been experimental designers of strong, sturdy vessels of enormous sail area for use wherever speed has been the prime requirement. . . .

The majority of the craft used by the Marylanders seems to have been the type known as "Shallops," generically "Chaloupe," eventually contracted to

* Born in 1902 at Salisbury, Maryland; graduate of University of Pennsylvania; Trust Investment Officer for The Pennsylvania Company; served in the United States Navy during World War II. Member of the Society for Nautical Research (London), and of several historical societies. Editor, *The American Neptune*. Author of various publications and articles in naval and maritime history.

This material on log canoes is taken with permission of the author and publisher from Mr. Brewington's book, *Chesapeake Bay Log Canoes* (Newport News, Virginia, The Mariners' Museum, 1937), Part I.

"Sloop." Mention of them is frequent in the colonial records for they are found doing all the plantation work, hauling tobacco, freight, and the like, whereas in Virginia canoes performed these tasks. Indeed, although the canoe appears often in the records, up to about 1670 it was generally in the hands of Indians, not in those of the Maryland colonists. Nor did inter-colonial trade bring the upper and lower bay settlers into constant contact: both produced the same commodities, and both imported their manufactured goods from England.

This condition lasted until the early years of the eighteenth century when the Eastern Shore of Maryland began to stop the production of tobacco exclusively and go into the manufacture of linens and woolens. At the same time, "the loss of their small craft by the french" seemingly forced the Marylanders to pay closer attention to domestic trade. Coincidentally the canoe appears with greater frequency in the Maryland records. The delayed entry of the craft into Maryland seems to account for the lag in its development in that colony, the single log construction carrying down longer, and the use of sail coming considerably after its appearance on the Virginia canoes.¹

There were three principal centers of canoe building: one in Virginia, two in Maryland. In the first region canoes built near the Poquoson River have long been the most famous, and the custom of calling all Virginia-built craft "Poquoson canoes" will be followed hereafter.² In Maryland waters, the canoes of the lower Eastern Shore (Pocomoke Sound to the Hônga River) vary considerably from those of the upper Chesapeake. These will be referred to as the "Pocomoke" and "Tilghman's canoes" respectively. The methods which will be described are by no means to be considered as ones unalterably followed by every canoe builder in each of the sections. All builders have their own technique with slight variations from the general practice. The descriptions are those of the methods most usually found and thought superior in the several localities. . . .

Maryland Canoes—On the upper Bay in both the Pocomoke and Tilghman sections the logs are handled in a manner quite different from the methods of the Poquoson section. The first step is to make a half model of the proposed canoe. Some of these are of the ordinary waterline type; others of a distinctively local type, each log being included in its full development as it will appear in the actual canoe. In the more poorly built canoes of these regions, the eye alone is used in attaining the form; this is known colloquially as the "winchum-squinchum" method, or "built by rack of eye."

When the model has been completed, the next step is to select the logs. Each of them is chosen for straightness, freedom from knots and defects, and, of course, for large diameter. The trees are cut, trimmed, and all of them hauled to the builder's yard. There the timbers are squared to the proper size; the keel log, the largest; the second and third, and the fourth and fifth matching each other, or if a log type model is used, cut to the size of the timbers indicated in the model.

After this preliminary work is finished, the center lines are chalked on the keel log, the length set off, the rake of stem and stern laid down, and cut with a saw. Station marks corresponding with those on the model are chalked on, and taking measurements from the model, the builder with adze and broadaxe begins to cut the keel log to shape. In some cases where another canoe is being copied, moulds are taken off with a strip of heavy lead bent around it at the proper points, and used as a template on the logs being worked.

With the keel log moulded, the second and third logs are blocked into the proper position, and the stations carefully marked in. These logs are shaped to

their portions of the model, first cutting in straight planes, then rounding off the body, using long battens to keep everything fair. Then the fourth and fifth logs are given identical treatment. Next, after the inner sides have been very roughly hollowed, the logs are assembled with bolts in the same way as it was practised in the Poquoson region. Another method of fastening the chunks together was occasionally used: key-pieces made of the toughest oak, shaped like a dovetail or butterfly plate were let into the hull both inside and out across the seams, then securely fastened with wooden pins, and worked down fair with the hull surface.

Down the Bay, it will be recalled, the builder at this stage of construction fills out the garboards and wings with short fillers, then adding tiers of logs to bring the hull to the desired sheer. Up the Bay, however, a different practise is customary. A simple scarph is cut into the ends of the wing logs, and the second and third logs are lined with the flat of the scarphs. Into these scarphs squared chunks are fitted, each extending to the stem or stern. But instead of meeting at the centerline as they do in Virginia, their ends are dovetailed together in a strong joint. All of these pieces are drift-bolted to the other logs.

The next step is to trim the top edges of the logs to a fair sheer line. Then the canoe is turned bottom up for a final surfacing. To make sure that no unfair spots have been left by the tools, battens are sprung along fore and aft and thwart-wise, and all protuberances worked off with a plane.

Up the Bay in order to get the finished thickness of the hull even on both sides, holes are bored through the logs, and wooden dowels, called "gauge pins," are driven in flush with the outer skin. The pins are in length equal to the desired thickness of that particular portion of the bottom or side. The adzeman then cuts away the interior of the hull until the inner ends of the dowels appear. A final surfacing is given with a smoothing plane. The thickness of the bottom is from three inches in a small canoe to eight in a very large one; the sides, two to four inches; the gunwales, from two to three inches.

If large logs have been used, the hull is now complete. But if small logs are used, it is seldom possible to attain the necessary depth. In the Poquoson region naturally curved logs are used to elevate the sides. But along the upper Bay shores, the log construction ends with the top of the wing pieces, and the height of freeboard is gained by another means. Frames exactly like those of an ordinary boat are bolted to the inner skin of the wing logs. On them the canoe carpenter builds up the sides with sawed lumber until the designed sheer line is reached. These are called "rising planks." The practise of using the rising planks seems to have come in far earlier than one would expect. A canoe found adrift in 1764 off the mouth of the Patapsco River had "about 1000 8d nails in her."³ Making full allowances for thwarts and cleats, the only places that such a number of nails of that size could be used would have been in fastening on timbers and rising planks. Since no comment is made in describing the canoe's structure, it could not have been unusual and therefore had been in use for several years. Another canoe (1795) is described as having "remarkable stout timbers of West India wood, the bottom pine."⁴

In the Pocomoke section the rising planks are put on lap streak, or clench, fashion, outside the upper edge of the logs. The stem is completed with a post usually straight, but sometimes slightly concave. Stern posts are always straight and raking. The interior is given its washboards, centerboard, stern seat, and so on, the mast step only differing from the Poquoson region. It is a large, heavy hook, fitted with the throat on the bottom, the arms extending upwards along the sides

like frames, and the partner, or "mast seat," a heavy thwart, is fayed around the hook's arms.

In the Tilghman's Island section, the rising planks are painstakingly spiled from stem to stern and fitted carvel to the wing chunks, then edge bolted through with iron bolts. The whole is strengthened with knees and breast hooks. Again the posts are straight and raking. But to the stem is added a "long head," a series of graceful flowing curves, decorated trail boards, head rails, and billet head, or even a miniature figure-head.

The mast steps are considerably more complicated, due to the long heavy masts which must be stepped and unstepped frequently. Along the keel log is bolted a heavy U-shaped block of wood, the open end forward. In the opening is fitted a second piece, the "tumbling block," with mortice for the mast heel. The after end of this block is hinged to the arms of the U with an iron pin. The partner is a wide heavy thwart with a slot cut fore and aft directly over the tumbling block. The slot is deep enough to allow the mast to rake either forward or aft of the vertical point, the angle being controlled by wedges called "chock blocks" which work against the bottom of the partner slot, and against the metal hasp which closes the open end. This arrangement has been used since about 1870.⁵

By the middle of the 1700s canoes were sometimes rather garishly painted, one being described as having a "white bottom, black gunnel, painted red in the inside;" another, "paid over within and without, with a mixture of Tar and Red Paint;" others were treated with tar alone, or occasionally left "raw."⁶ In recent years the hulls have been painted red or green to a little over the load water line; above this, white with any decorations in red or yellow. The interiors may or may not have been painted according to the wishes or pocket-book of the owners.

The Maryland Oyster Law of 1872 required all canoes authorized to tong for oysters to paint their license number alongside the gunwale in "black figures, not less than three inches in length, and of proportionate width, in a white ground." This law is still in force, and accounts for the presence of numbers on canoes which have never been fitted for gasoline engines. . . .

On the Chesapeake the lateen was a well-known rig, for when the Virginians and Marylanders began to build their State Navies during the Revolution, that rig was given to many of the smaller craft. Until about the same time, sail . . . was apparently unknown on the upper Bay canoes. . . .

There is a tradition widespread throughout the entire Bay section that the canoe's sails were derived directly from the lateen. . . . Unfortunately no evidence of the second step—that of discarding the mast and placing the forward yard arm in the mast step—has come to light. But . . . [by] 1805, when the *Methodist* was built, the whole course had been run and the leg of mutton sail had been attained.⁷

Just as the hull of the Maryland canoe has a number of variations, so has the rig. . . . Once sail was added to the canoe, a keel became a necessary adjunct. The keel, though, was not of the usual shape: it was tapered from stem and stern towards the center, with the deepest point just forward of the mid-ship section. Or else, instead of the double taper, it was cut straight from the forefoot, becoming more shallow as it proceeded aft roughly in proportion to the drag of the hull itself.⁸ A rectangular plane of lateral resistance resulted. This method of getting "a hold on the water" continued until well toward the end of the eighteen hundreds, despite the fact that the true centerboard had been patented in America in 1811 and was in use on the Bay sloops soon afterwards.⁹ About 1850-60, the

device was tried on the Poquoson canoes, and found successful. From that region it spread Northward until by 1881 Henry Hall found it in general use all over the Bay on the larger canoes. Today a keel is a great rarity.¹⁰

The Racing Canoes—. . . By 1840 there were "organized" races being held at St. Michael's, particularly on the Fourth of July, with sometimes as many as thirty starters. Unfortunately little is known of these early racing events: a silver cup, the "Douglas Cup," so called for the canoe which won it, was the first formal prize; a system of handicapping (six seconds per foot per mile of course) was instituted.¹¹ In some of these races the start was made in an unusual way. The contestants hauled the sterns of their canoes upon the beach; sail was taken in and furled, and the crews went ashore. On a signal, all hands rushed for their canoes, shoved off, fixed their rudders, made sail, and set out. The wild *mêlée* made by such a start can be readily imagined: upset canoes, tangled gear, and high language. There was no beating the gun, and ample excitement was afforded the spectators as well as the contestants.¹² The rivalry caused by these races was so great that soon canoes especially designed for racing were built. . . .

With the coming of the War Between the States when the sympathies of the Maryland towns were divided even within families, the meets were discontinued.¹³ However, canoes loaded with Southern adherents raced Yankee guard boats in attempts to reach the Confederate lines. The canoes evidently won, for the races continued as long as Southern arms held any part of Tidewater Virginia. . . .¹⁴

Up to the organization of the Chesapeake Bay Yacht Club in 1885 canoe racing continued in a more or less haphazard way with pick up races being held whenever a sufficient number of starters could be collected. . . . During this period, many famous canoes were built: the *Dashaway*, 1877, by Robert Lambdin; the *Mary Rider*, 1877, by James Lowry; the *Magic* and *Margaret P. Hall*, by Charles Tarr; the *Island Belle*, *Island Bride*, *Island Blossom*, by W. S. Covington; *Belle M. Crane*, by Greenbury Coffin, etc.¹⁵

For a number of years racing continued under the leadership of this club, but by 1903 interest in the log canoes had waned to such an extent the races were discontinued. . . . [In 1921] two Baltimore newspapers organized a race meet for the commercial sailing craft of the Bay. The class for canoes attracted only five entries. The next year but three arrived to start, and the following season the canoe event was dropped altogether. However, 1924 saw the canoe again racing under the auspices of the newly formed Miles River Yacht Club. In 1933 the Chesapeake Bay Log Canoe Association was organized to foster and develop the sport. . . .¹⁶

Now [1937] some dozen old canoes (one almost sixty years old and still a winner) and three built since 1930 take part in the various annual races which are held under the auspices of the chief Eastern Shore yacht clubs. The principal event of the season is the race for the "Governor's Cup," first donated in 1927 by the Governor of Maryland, to be contested for by sharp sterned craft only. Other trophies for canoes are the "Covington Prize" for canoes built prior to 1917, offered in memory of the great canoe builder Captain Sid Covington; and the "John B. Harrison Trophy" for canoes built since 1917 offered in honor of the best known of the present day canoe builders. . . .

With all the rejuvenation racing has given the canoe, its future seems none too bright. As a work boat, the sailing canoe has already disappeared. In 1880 the United States Census investigators found 6,300 canoes in use on the Chesapeake with the builders turning out about 175 new craft annually.¹⁷ One builder, Captain



(Photos by Perry-Fix, Salisbury)

Aerial View of Ocean City Showing Inlet Cut by Storm in 1933

Robert Lambdin of St. Michael's, Maryland, is reputed to have built a total of 68 canoes between 1865 and 1894.¹⁸ During the same period probably at least two hundred men were first-class canoe wrights.

Co-incidental, however, with the development of the inexpensive gasoline engine which eliminated the oyster tonger's dependence on wind, the use of sail began to decline rapidly. From 1903 to 1933 not a single sailing canoe is reported to have been built in the Tilghman's Island region, and only a few in the Pocomoke and the Poquoson regions. All the old canoes strong enough to stand vibration were converted: sails were discarded and centerboards ripped out; shaft holes were bored and engines bolted in place. Where once the waters of the Bay were alive with hundreds of trim canoes, all busy sailing to and from their work, one now finds only oily, grimy motor boats on the oyster beds.

As for the racing canoes, only four have been built in the last decade.¹⁹ All the other additions to the fleet have been old work canoes, resurrected, rebuilt, and refitted for sail. When time has destroyed this source of supply, even the sport of racing seems doomed. Probably less than ten men are now [1937] living who are capable of turning out a successful canoe. They whose knowing eyes and skilled hands brought the canoe to the height of its perfection are fast going. With them passes the ancient art of building the Chesapeake Bay Canoe.

Chesapeake Bay Bugeyes—In addition to his excellent work on Chesapeake Bay Log Canoes, M. V. Brewington has also written a book on Chesapeake Bay Bugeyes.²⁰ This characteristic craft is well-known to Chesapeake Bay people. It has two raking masts carrying triangular sails, and a clipper bow, and has been used to carry lumber, watermelons, grain or oysters.

Brewington calls the bugeye the "ultimate development of the American aboriginal dugout canoe" which came into being as a result of the peculiar needs of the oyster fishing of the Chesapeake Bay. When the oyster dredge, a device imported from New England, came into use, replacing tonging from small canoes, the bugeye was developed as the most suitable vessel to use. Existing types of vessels such as schooners and pungys were not suitable. Consequently, there developed from the log canoes small vessels known as "brogans" and from them, the log-hulled bugeyes, the first of which made their appearance in the Bay between 1865 and 1870.

The bugeye is essentially a hybrid. Brewington says that the principal elements came from the canoe: "the basic design, the dugout log hull, and the sail plan: all admirably developed for economy, durability, and ease of handling with a minimum of trained hands. From the pungy came the combination knightheads and hawsepieces, the sweeping sheer, the low freeboard, and the log rail which allowed the oyster dredge to be easily and quickly hoisted on deck. From the Bay schooner came the shoal draft, the broad beam, the unobstructed deck layout, and the graceful longhead with its decorated trail-boards." The scarcity of logs about 1800 necessitated construction by the conventional frame and plank methods. Motorboats, of course, are responsible for the outgoing of the bugeyes.

Although there are several theories concerning the origin of the name bugeye, Brewington believes it is a corruption of the Scotch word "buckler," or perhaps of a word of some African dialect. Although a few bugeyes were built in Virginia, most of them were built in Maryland, and the best of these on the Eastern Shore.²¹

NOTES, CHAPTER XXXIX

1. Margaret Shove Morriss, *Colonial Trade in Maryland, 1689-1715* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1914), pp. 109-113; Clarence Gould, *Money and Transportation in Maryland, 1720-1765* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1915); William Edmundson, *A Journal of the Life of W. E.* (Dublin, 1715), p. 93.
2. The Poquoson River is variously called "Coastin River," "Per Coastin River," and "McCoastin River."
3. *Maryland Gazette*, May 24, 1764.
4. *Federal Intelligencer*, Nov. -20, 1795.
5. Personal testimonies of George Leech, John Bradford, J. S. Shores, John B. Harrison—Canoe builders—and John G. Earle, an "Investigator."
6. *Maryland Gazette*, May 24, 1764; Oct. 18, 1764. *Maryland Journal*, Sept. 6, 1775.
7. The *Methodist* was by far the most famous canoe ever produced in the Chesapeake Bay Country. Her owner was the Reverend Joshua Thomas, a preacher whose charges were the inhabitants of Tangier, Smith, and Deal's islands. The canoe carried the "Parson of the Islands" from one church to another from 1805 until his death. The canoe itself to quote one who "makes many trips in this boat," the Reverend Mr. Thomas's grandson, was "built out of one tree which grew near Curtis Chapel on the land of a Mr. Broughton and was so large it was regarded as a curiosity by the neighborhood. Mr. Hance Croswell bought the tree for ten dollars and when it was felled it shook the ground for miles around. Two canoes were hewn from its trunk. The *Methodist* was the larger, and hewn in one piece, twenty-eight feet long, five feet wide, and about four feet deep." She was still afloat as late as 1907 when she was borrowed to be exhibited at the Jamestown Exposition. She never arrived there, and all trace of her has been entirely lost. The *Methodist's* original spars and sails are said to be still in the hands of Joshua Thomas's descendants.
8. Personal testimony of John Branford.
9. Arthur H. Clark, *The History of Yachting, 1600-1815* (New York, Putnam's, 1904), p. 148.
10. Henry Hall, *Report of the Shipbuilding Industry of The United States* (Washington, 10th U. S. Census, VIII, Government Printer, 1884), p. 35.
11. Easton (Md.) *Star-Democrat*, June 26, 1936. Article on Sailing Canoe Racing.
12. Testimony of John G. Earle.
13. *Baltimore Sun*, June 9, 1935.
14. Testimony of George Leech.
15. *Baltimore Sun*, June 9, 1935.
16. *Easton Star-Democrat*, June 26, 1936.
17. Henry Hall, *Report on the Shipbuilding Industry of The United States*, pp. 34-35; Fish Commission, United States, *Bulletins and Reports* (Washington, Government Printer, 1878-1935), XII.
18. *Baltimore Sun*, June 9, 1935.
19. Testimony of John D. Williams.
20. M. V. Brewington, *Chesapeake Bay Bugeyes* (Museum Publication No. 8, Newport News, Virginia, Mariners' Museum, 1941).
21. Brewington's book is reviewed for the *Maryland Historical Magazine*, XXXVII, No. 2 (June, 1942), pp. 214-216, by Judge Emory H. Niles.